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Andrew Cochran sets sights on CBC's future

ANDREA NEMETZ ARTS REPORTER

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The senior managing director for English services in Atlantic Canada is off to Toronto to work on the broadcaster's five-year survival plan on behalf of CBC News and local stations



Andrew Cochran is moving to Toronto to spearhead the CBC's Strategy 2020. (CONTRIBUTED)

Some kids dream of being an astronaut, an Olympic athlete or a movie star.

More than 40 years ago, young Andrew Cochran dreamed of joining CBC.

And now he's helping the national broadcaster better position itself in a new media universe.

On Aug. 11, Cochran, the senior managing director for English services at CBC/Radio-Canada in Atlantic Canada, will begin a new job with the CBC in Toronto implementing Strategy 2020, the broadcaster's five-year plan, on behalf of CBC News and its local services.

A memo sent to staff says: "It is a major initiative that will involve all levels of the department and will see us fundamentally transform into a more mobile, digital service."

He's already been helping craft the blueprint for CBC's future, and now he's creating a business

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action plan which includes looking at the strategy for CBC News and “the 29 local stations we have across the country, each of which provide local news, information, and performance programming for their respective areas.”

He will also be finding new sources of revenue and overseeing the transformation of CBC from a real estate owner to a tenant.

And Cochran, 62, feels as if everything he’s done has led to this position.

It was while attending Queen Elizabeth High School in Halifax that Cochran caught the news bug.

“In Grade 12, I’d go down the hill to CBC’s Bell Road building, find my way to the cafeteria, buy a cup of coffee and sit in the cafeteria. I thought I was in the real world and it was thrilling,” he says by phone from his Halifax office, after a morning flight from Toronto where he was in a series of meetings.

“In the late 1960s, a frequent issue was what was going on with the youth of the day,” he recalls, noting public concern over long hair and drug use by young people.

“I went to a producer of the supper-hour show and suggested I be the youth reporter. He challenged me for months, about why he should hire me, asked me what I had to offer. I honed my pitching skills and my ability to get quickly to a point. My advantage was that I had access.”

Eventually he was given a tryout and found doing interviews with a CBC crew “absolutely thrilling.”

Moving over to CJCH, he found himself doing morning radio news and supper-hour TV news, all on the same day, and he realized the news had become his life’s

passion.

He put studies in political science and sociology at Dalhousie, and later commerce, on the back burner.

By the 1970s, like many other Maritimers, he went down the road to Toronto, where from 1972 to 1979 he was a producer and executive producer at CTV.

At 23, he was associate producer of Canada AM and stepped into the job of heading up the show when his predecessor left for the Fifth Estate.

“I am still amazed they took a chance on me to run the program. My assignment then was to turn it into a morning news program and grow the audience,” he says, noting it had been a morning interview show.

But, he stresses, it was a different time for the news industry.

“During the whole period of the 1970s, programs were growing at CTV and CBC, and Global was starting. There was a ton of explosive growth.”

In 1984, he was back in Halifax working as president at Studio East Limited, the first private post-production facility in Atlantic Canada. He morphed into an independent producer as CEO at Cochran Communications Inc./Cochran Interactive Inc. from 1989 to 2002, with hits like the children’s TV series Theodore Tugboat and Pit Pony. He also made documentaries for CBC, PBS and the Discovery Channel.

“I always kept a hand in journalism. Storytelling has informed everything I’ve done,” he says, noting “practising curiosity as a profession” has also helped in business.

By 2002, it was time to return to school and he completed a master’s degree in electronic commerce at Dalhousie. He loved the academic life — the research, the writing and the teaching,

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and began work on an interdisciplinary PhD.

His studies focused on marrying intellectual property with finance.

“How do you find value in something you can’t see, feel or touch?” he says, noting that is becoming increasingly important in today’s world.

He was teaching in Dalhousie’s business and law schools and thoroughly enjoying academe, when in 2007 a senior CBC executive called out of the blue and hired him as regional director of TV for the Maritimes (TV and radio were separate at the time).

At the time, CBC-TV was losing viewers because community stations weren’t focused on producing local news.

So Cochran pushed to shift the focus back to local, and by 2008, when radio and TV were combined, he was overseeing six stations serving Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island and growing an online presence.

He also began the process of helping find new premises for CBC, consolidating the Sackville Street and Bell Road studios into one smaller facility to save money on heat, lights, upkeep and more.

“We had 142,000 square feet and we’re moving to a 44,000-square-foot facility,” he says, noting CBC Halifax should be operating out of a leased facility on Chebucto Road in west-end Halifax by late fall.

“Every dollar that we’re saving on infrastructure we can devote to content.”

Further consolidations are expected in the region that now includes Newfoundland and Labrador.

Cochran, who currently oversees nearly 300 hours per week of programming, will apply what he’s learned at CBC about connecting to the audience to stations across the country.

“I’m using that frame of reference to help inform strategies for the future. People in Atlantic Canada have a very close connection to CBC and we’re the better for it. It’s a wonderful part of the CBC story. The bond here is truly special.”

Cochran says he “is part of a very large, well-qualified team of very smart people” working on Strategy 2020.

“It’s a turbulent time in many aspects of the media world, and in business in general, particularly in large companies that have been in business for a long period of time.

“The task we all face is keeping current with the choices we have, so steps in a new direction can be deliberate and taken with confidence.

“These days, that means reading the business environment in real time, and then being agile enough to act in a timely way, always respecting our audience and the highly talented people that work here.”

Denise Wilson will replace Cochran as senior managing director in Atlantic Canada.

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